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ARISTOTLE'S DOCTRINE OF KATHARSIS AND THE POSITIVE OR CONSTRUCTIVE ACTIVITY INVOLVED

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I

Aristotle's doctrine of katharsis is set forth in his definition of tragedy. Tragedy, according to that definition, is "an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions."¹

Of this doctrine of katharsis or purgation itself I have no new interpretation to offer. Nor do I aim to supersede the translators or the critics. The interpretation given this passage by the best of them is evidently correct and to be relied upon. It is the doctrine itself that is inadequate. It is inadequate, at least, as a statement or description of that inner experience through which in part, as Aristotle implies, we come to know what the nature of tragedy is. For, in gaining in this way what we know of the nature of tragedy, we are more dependent upon a positive and constructive activity than upon the negative process which Aristotle calls katharsis or purgation.

To understand more precisely what is involved in Aristotle's doctrine of katharsis it is necessary first to review briefly two points in the text. Both points are contained in that part of the definition which reads: *δι' ἔλεον καὶ φόβον περαίνουσα τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν*, and which Butcher translates: "through pity

¹ S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, New York, 1898, 2d ed., p. 23.

and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions.” One point concerns the word *κάθαρσιν*; the other concerns the genitive expression *τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων*, which depends upon it.

With regard to the genitive, most critics are agreed that the feelings referred to in the expressions *τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων* and *δὲ ἔλεον καὶ φόβον* are not identical. Both expressions refer to pity and fear; but the pity and fear in the one case differ from the pity and fear in the other. The *ἔλεος* and *φόβος* are quite evidently, according to Aristotle’s definition, the *aesthetic* emotions of pity and fear—the form of these emotions that is awakened or aroused by “the tragic representation”; whereas the feelings referred to in the expression *τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων* are “the emotions of pity and fear *which belong to real life.*”¹

Even with this important distinction before us a second difficulty in this first point confronts us. For the genitive expression itself is open to at least two distinct interpretations. Under one interpretation the phrase means, as Ueberweg takes it, “not a purification of the emotions, but a (temporary) emancipation of the individual from their influence a temporary relief, to be obtained through their very excitation (by artificial means) and subsequent subsidence. . . . the emotions excited in us are (again) quieted by their very exhaustion, are in a sense purged out of us (*καθαίρεται*); but although it is only the emotions immediately excited by the given work of art which are thus affected directly, yet indirectly *all other similar emotions* are similarly purged away; we are *temporarily freed (or ‘cleansed’) from all of them.*”² But, according to Butcher, this is not the correct interpretation. *τῶν τοιούτων* does not mean “all such emotions,” or “these and suchlike emotions,” but, by a frequent and idiomatic use, “the aforesaid emotions,” namely, pity and fear. The expression means, then, not that there is effected an actual temporary discharge and

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 236, footnote. The italics are mine.

² *History of Philosophy*, I, 178–79 (italics mine). This may be called the cynical view; but there is much in Greek literature to support it. The emotions themselves were thought bad. Cf. Plato *Phaedo* 69 C, *κάθαρσις τῶν τοιούτων πάντων* [*sc. τῶν ηδονῶν*], “the purging away of these pleasures—” i.e., a deliverance of the soul from lusts. In this passage the medical sense of *κάθαρσις* shades off into the religious sense. Sometimes it shades off into a moral sense.

removal of the emotions of pity and fear, but rather the purgation or purification of the pity and fear of real life through the awakening of the aesthetic emotions of pity and fear. "The feelings of pity and fear in real life," he says, in stating his view, "contain a morbid and disturbing element. In the process of tragic excitation they find relief, and the morbid element is thrown off. . . . The painful element in the pity and fear of reality is purged away; the emotions themselves are purged."¹ The expulsion of a painful and disquieting element is effected. Or, as he has rephrased it elsewhere: "Pity and fear, artificially stirred, expel the latent pity and fear which we bring with us from real life, or at least such elements in them as are disquieting."² This seems the more satisfactory interpretation.

This interpretation of the genitive expression carries with it the general explanation of the second point, namely, katharsis. For, if the interpretation is correct, it is precisely in the elimination of the morbid, painful, disquieting, and disturbing element in the pity and fear of real life through the arousing of the aesthetic form of these emotions that what Aristotle calls katharsis takes place. This *is* katharsis. *τὴν κάθαρσιν* are his words; and Butcher translates: "the proper purgation." He might have translated, "the well-known"; for the homeopathic treatment of *ἐνθουσιασμός* or spiritual emotionalism by a kind of wild and restless music was familiar to the Greeks; and it was, evidently, the immediate source of suggestion to Aristotle for this part of his theory of tragedy. To make clear what he meant by this kind of homeopathic treatment through tragedy, Aristotle used a novel metaphor drawn from medicine. He may have done so even consciously. His father, Nichomachus, was a physician. The theory was new. The metaphor was as apt as it was illuminating. The expression is natural enough. According to Bernays, then, whom Butcher fol-

¹ Butcher, *op. cit.*, p. 249. Nothing strikes more directly to the heart of one's efficiency in life than pity, especially self-pity, and fear. Economically regarded—and we may well so regard it—the drama, and especially tragedy, is one of the most highly effective means of maintaining at normal efficiency in life the individual members of that society out of which the drama springs. Something of this Aristotle evidently recognized.

² *Ibid.*, p. 242.

lows on this point, katharsis "denotes a pathological effect on the soul analogous to the effect of medicine on the body. . . . Tragedy excites the emotions of pity and fear—kindred emotions that are in the breasts of all men—and by the act of excitation affords a pleasurable relief."¹ Katharsis, as a form or type of inner experience through which in part we come to know the nature of tragedy, means the purification, through the aesthetic awakening of pity and fear, of the morbid, painful, disquieting element that belongs to these emotions as we know them in real or everyday life.

With this explanation of katharsis and a satisfactory interpretation of the genitive expression before us, the latter part of Aristotle's definition becomes clearer. We may translate somewhat freely as follows: Tragedy effects, through pity and fear, as these emotions are awakened by tragic representation, the proper or well-known katharsis or purification of the emotions of pity and fear as we know them in real life; that is, the morbid, painful, disquieting element in this form of these emotions is purged away or thrown off.

This general exposition helps us understand Aristotle's doctrine of katharsis. But if this exposition is correct, and if Aristotle's purpose in the latter part of his definition may fairly be said to be an attempt to represent, as far as inner experience can reveal, the essential nature of tragedy, it would seem that the possibilities of analysis have nowhere been carried to their logical and psychological conclusions. For both Aristotle and his chief interpreters leave the question with its negative side uppermost. Unduly attracted, perhaps, by the novel and striking form of his metaphor, Aristotle emphasized the negative aspect merely of a total activity; his interpreters, overabsorbed, it may be, in controversies about nice points of interpretation, have failed to see what more is involved. True, Aristotle suggests by his phrase *δι' ἐλέον καὶ φόβον*, "through pity and fear," a recognition of some process or activity that is positive rather than negative. But he goes no farther. He deals more with the *result* of some implied process than he does with the process itself. The final emphasis is not upon pity and fear as *aesthetic* emotions (his proper subject), but rather upon pity and

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 240-41.

fear as we know these emotions in real life. In truth, Aristotle has thrown the emphasis in his definition upon a form or type of pity and fear which, strictly speaking, constitutes no direct part of the aesthetic realization of what tragedy is. Butcher, too, implies some recognition of a positive or constructive activity. "The spectator," he says in one passage, "is lifted out of himself. He becomes one with the tragic sufferer, and through him with humanity at large he passes out of himself. . . . He quits the narrow sphere of the individual."¹ But even here Butcher is speaking, not of any general activity or process, but of tragic fear alone. And he is led to his conclusion, not, it would seem, through the direct recognition of some positive activity involved, but by an analysis of tragic fear itself, which, as he says, is "based on an imaginative union with another's life." Not only Aristotle but Butcher, his ablest interpreter, have failed to bring out clearly that there is a positive or constructive process or activity involved in our aesthetic realization of what tragedy is, and that this process or activity must come into play before katharsis, or the purification of pity and fear, as we know these emotions in real life, can be effected.

My suggestion, then, is this: So far as we know through inner experience what the essential nature of tragedy is, we know it, not through katharsis, but primarily through a positive or constructive activity. The distinctive function of this activity is to build up, on the basis of a character represented in the drama as failing, a corresponding ideal and successful character. To judge an act as unwise or evil is necessarily to have a standard in accordance with which the judgment is made. Failure and tragedy are inconceivable without an implied background of success and happiness. Evil or failing characters, artistically presented, call forth a series of standards in terms of which these characters are said to be evil or to have failed: "On the earth the broken arcs; in the heaven a perfect round." Katharsis, however, does take place. Aristotle is not wrong. The emotions of pity and fear as we know them in real life are purified of their morbid, painful, disquieting element. But this katharsis or purification is secondary or incidental to the main activity or process. The primary and essential part of the activity or process is positive, not negative.

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 261.

II

Consider *Hamlet*. When one reads or sees *Hamlet*, he does at least two things: he sets up unconsciously a series of standards according to which he judges the shortcomings and failures of Hamlet; and he groups and unifies these standards, in the same unconscious way, into a conception of an ideal and successful Hamlet.

And first, the setting up of the standards. When, for example, Hamlet spends his time making the shallow and egotistical old Polonius appear ridiculous, winds the sycophants, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, into confusion, takes up with players, while still "this thing's to do"; when, later, Hamlet the gentleman falls a-cursing like a very drab, uses coarse language to Ophelia, and rails against his mother; whenever, indeed, any expression of Hamlet's action, thought, or feeling calls forth the condemnation of reader or spectator, a standard according to which that judgment is made is, however unconsciously, necessarily set up.

The reader or spectator is not subjected, however, to the strain of making all his judgments himself. Shakespeare aids him. Throughout the play Shakespeare implies and suggests the more essential standards by which Hamlet should be judged. And he does this with such artistic subtlety and skill as not only to leave the reader or spectator unconscious of what he is being led to do, but to make him glow with delight in the belief that he is doing it himself. If, absorbed in Hamlet's hatred of insincerity and sham, and in the cleverness with which Polonius is made ridiculous or the purposes of the new-found spies, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, are laid bare, the reader or spectator temporarily loses his true moral perspective of Hamlet's character;¹ he can scarcely fail to regain it as he hears Hamlet, out of his own mouth, condemn himself for trifling with his acknowledged life-purpose:

O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
 Is it not monstrous that this player here,
 But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
 Could force his soul so to his own conceit
 That from her working all his visage wann'd;
 What would he do,
 Had he the motive and the cue for passion
 That I have?²

¹ This is precisely what the average theater-goer does.

² II, ii, 576 f.

For another kind of judgment the reader or spectator gets his cue from the words addressed by Hamlet himself to his friend Horatio:

. . . . thou hast been
As one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing;
A man that fortune's buffets and rewards
Hast ta'en with equal thanks.¹

There is really no other artistic justification for these words; for one realizes at once that, improbable as all this is for Horatio, it represents precisely what Hamlet himself had not, but should have, done. Or again, at the close of the play, when Fortinbras, the man of practical achievement, says of Hamlet:

For he was likely, had he been put on,
To have prov'd most royally,²

a judgment is made which is probably corrective of the one set up by the pathetic story of Hamlet's indecision and inaction. All such speeches—even entire characters, Horatio and Fortinbras, for example—are finally justifiable as organic parts of the play, in that they are but subtle means to keep the standards of reader or spectator within the channels of proper artistic judgment. Aided in this way by the artist, thrilled with the joyous illusion that he himself is doing it, the reader or spectator sets up a series of standards according to which, now in thought, now in feeling, now in action, he judges Hamlet to have made but partial achievement or to have failed.

The reader or spectator does something more than set up a series of disconnected standards. He unifies these standards. Synchronously with his setting up of standards, and directly as a result of his doing so, he builds up in imagination a conception of an ideal and successful character. Stimulated by the representations of Hamlet's evident failures, skilfully guided by the poet, each reader or spectator builds up for himself³ in imagination an ideal

¹ III, ii, 70 f.

² V, ii, 408 f.

³ For this reason alone there can be no final interpretation of *Hamlet*. Each man's Hamlet is after all but a reflection of his own ideal and potential self. Necessarily so. For since the standards are his, and can be only his, the total conception of character can be nothing else but his own reflected self. Where the ultimate ideals are indefinite or open to varied construction, as in *Hamlet*, the interpretations will vary widely. Often they will be contradictory.

character, as successful as he is happy, which is the complement of the one he sees before him or finds in the pages of his text. It was this ideal, successful, and happy character the artist really had in mind as he wrote. This was the artistic conception in terms of which he portrayed his tragedy. It is part of the powerful illusion of poetry that while reader and spectator think they are but following the portrayal of a tragic character, they are being led to conceive and to construct a complementary character which, though it is individual, is also a part of universal humanity.

The conception of character formed necessarily varies; in this play, to an unusual degree. The Hamlet conceived by the boy who merely gets the story, thinking of the young prince who might have escaped death and gained the throne, is surpassed by that of the man, even of prosaic experience, who conceives of the ideal Hamlet as one exacting blood-revenge; this Hamlet, again, is surpassed by the man of larger sweep of vision who sees the ideal Hamlet, through lofty effort and vigorous action, proving himself "most royally." According to his range of experience, his insight, his aptitude, each genuine reader or spectator, aided by the artist, unconsciously builds up in imagination a conception of an ideal and successful character corresponding almost point for point to the failing one before him. The one is the tragic Hamlet—a character yielding, breaking, disintegrating, dying; the other is the complementary form—a striving, achieving, living, and perfectly unified character. Typical situations, relating in turn to the different sides of Hamlet's nature, physical, moral, social, political, aesthetic, and religious,¹ have been set forth by the artist to stimulate this constructive activity. Under the poet's inviting and powerful illusion the reader or spectator groups and unifies into a single personality practically all the best standards of character and conduct he has come to know. But because he has been drawn out of himself, because his eye has been fixed "most constantly" on Hamlet, he

¹ For example, the aesthetic decline of Hamlet is typified in the famous closet scene (III, iv). So far is the departure from the gentlemanly Hamlet of the early part of the play that Stevenson thought Shakespeare failed here. This was the author's lost battle (see his essay *Some Gentlemen in Fiction*). So in religion Hamlet passes from a state of belief in the freedom and power of the will (cf. I, v, 190-91) to a belief in pure fatalism (cf. V, ii, 10-11).

has not thought of himself; he has not even suspected what it is that the poet has so skilfully led him to do. The Hamlet truly known by poet and by reader or spectator alike is not the tragic Hamlet, not the failing Hamlet, but a positive, consistently unified, ideal, and successful Hamlet, one in whom, indeed, the tragic character can alone find artistic justification.

III

Hamlet is relatively a modern play. A positive or constructive activity is undoubtedly involved in the katharsis effected by this type of play; but against it, as a conclusive illustration, the charge of modernity might not unfairly be maintained. The keystone of Shakespeare's moral arch is the freedom of the will and individual moral responsibility. Character and passion practically determine destiny; a man's fate is his own character. Shakespeare does not disregard the formative influence and the shaping power of an outside force, whatever it may be called; but he does not make it determinative. Such conceptions were not acceptable to the Greeks. Greek drama, though far from disregarding the shaping and determining power of character, leans the other way. It is more fateful. The disaster that wrecks the life of the tragic character is due, not to deliberate choice of crime and wickedness, but to some great error or frailty. Greek drama gives the history of a deed that infringes upon the social order; it is not individualistic. It portrays a deed, committed unwittingly or with righteous intent, contrary to the social order, which goes hurtling through the world to a fatal outcome. With a fixed order behind it, does this type of play, in effecting katharsis, involve the positive and constructive process or activity?

We can be fortunate in our choice. From many indications in the *Poetics* it would appear that the *Oedipus Tyrannus* of Sophocles, structurally greatest and most representative of Greek tragedy, was Aristotle's ideal play. This play and its implied conceptions seem to have been in the background of Aristotle's mind as he wrote the *Poetics*.

The story is typically Greek. By guessing her riddle, Oedipus, the great and the wise, delivers Thebes from the Sphinx. Though

an alien, he reaches the throne; he marries the widow of the late King Laius. A pestilence falls upon the city. When the Thebans ask the oracle at Delphi how they can be healed, the god Apollo bids them seek and punish the murderer of Laius, who was slain on the road to Delphi. Oedipus eagerly takes up the search. With distressing and fateful certainty it soon appears that he himself was the unwitting murderer of Laius; that he was the murdered man's son; and that, therefore, his wife is his mother.

Not then had I become
My father's murderer,
Nor wedded her I have my being from:
Whom now no God will bless,
Child of incestuousness
In her that bare me, being the spouse of her;
Yea if aught ill worse than all ill be there,
That Oedipus must bear.¹

In his agony and frenzy he puts out his own eyes.

It needs no elaboration of this story to show that the fate of Oedipus was due to no striking moral defect. That he was hasty and impulsive, that he even had a touch of proud self-assertion, is true. But these slighter defects do not constitute *ἀμάρτια*. The error of Oedipus was due to unavoidable ignorance; *ἀτύχημα*, "misfortune," is the better term, as Butcher has pointed out.² The character of Oedipus was clearly not the immediate determining factor in his destiny. He is caught in the web of an unhappy fate. For his slaying of Laius he incurs some degree of culpability. But he had provocation; possibly the deed was done in self-defense.³ His life, as Butcher says, was a chain of errors, errors for which he himself seems in nowise responsible. His marriage with his own mother, staggering in its horror to him as to us, was the culminating point of his fateful career. Yet all was done in ignorance. That he sinned unwittingly frees him from no moiety of punishment. Unjust and unfair as it may appear, it is a part of life and

¹ Ll. 1357 f.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 312.

³ *Oed. Col.* 992. Noted by Butcher.

a part of something called fate that he should lose his life in tragic waste because of the blindness, infirmity, and ignorance of human nature.

The degree to which in this play we are moved by pity and fear is probably unparalleled in Greek tragedy. Our feelings go out, yearning almost for relief, to the tragic sorrows of this fated character. As we recognize the growing fatefulness of it all, our sense of personal impotency and powerlessness deepens. Following a modern play, we usually carry with our judgment the submerged and suffused notion that, had we only the opportunity, could we but get the ear of the erring character, we might point out to him his fatal mistake, indicate another possible course of action, and so save him from tragic outcome. But before the career of Oedipus we sit back awed, staggered. Our eager minds recoil upon themselves. Our willing hands fall listless to our sides. We can do nothing.

Such a state of mind, moved by pity and fear and purified of all egotistical traces of these emotions, might seem in its very statement to deny all positive or constructive activity. It might seem that, while we do forget ourselves, we merely acquiesce in a fateful order which we are powerless to change or reconstruct. It might seem that, here at least, our doctrine was not true. But here, too, the positive or constructive activity connected with katharsis is involved. True, it is more sweeping and comprehensive, for it takes in, not some central tragic character alone, but the whole social order and the ultimate principles that underlie it. It is an arraignment of life itself. It may be that the principles of life and the social order are fixed and unchangeable. In the world of fact and truth at least they may be so. But in the world of imagination they are not. They are at least not necessarily so. There they may be shifted, rearranged, reorganized at man's will. There, not what *is*, and makes man unhappy and ruins his life, but what *may and ought to be* to bring him joy, is conceived and built into an ideal world. Synchronous with the dramatic presentation of the fated career of Oedipus is the imaginative construction of a world where the opposite of his character and fate is true. If it were not so, "what's a heaven for"? However untrue in fact, however

impossible of final realization in life as it is, such a world of imagination and ideals is a place of refuge, temporary but pleasing and refreshing, from the irksome, if not brutal, facts of life itself.

Here, as in the modern drama, in any rational drama, indeed, the mind will regard as true and rational only those presentations of tragic character which allow an imaginative construction of a positive, ideal, successful, and, in some measure, happy character to correspond to the tragic character of the stage or of the printed text. Pity and fear as tragic emotions are otherwise impossible. *Any* conception of tragedy becomes rational, becomes *conceivable* indeed, only as a background of some kind of corresponding success and happiness is constructed in imagination. Tragedy, as a form of failure, has meaning only as it implies conceivable success. Whether a play be Greek and founded upon fate, or oriental and founded upon religious ceremony, or Shakespearean and founded upon the freedom of the will, or contemporary and grounded in the doctrine of environment, matters not at all, so far as pity and fear are concerned in their relation to a positive and constructive activity. Each type quickens pity and fear. That is essential, indispensable. But to awaken pity and fear some conception of a non-tragic career is psychologically necessary. A positive or constructive activity is involved wherever there is true tragic emotion.

IV

Two points appear in conclusion. First, there is an intimate connection between what Aristotle calls katharsis, and a positive or constructive activity. Katharsis is not a separate and independent effect of tragedy. It is the negative side of a total activity, the primary function of which is to build up and construct an ideal corresponding to the tragic character. Katharsis cannot be produced unless this constructive activity works. Purification is the negative side of a positive achievement; and the positive achievement is more important than the purification. That is an after-effect, a by-product of imaginative achievement. Pity and fear in real life contain a morbid and disquieting element. This morbid and disquieting element in this form of these emotions is carried off through an awakening of the aesthetic form of these emotions.

Tragedy effects a change of point of view. It enables the reader or spectator to attach to the tragic character feelings previously centered in himself. To pity and fear for the tragic character means that one passes out of and beyond the pity, especially self-pity, and the fear (apprehension about success) that is touching one's own life. The emotions are the same in kind; they have changed their point of attachment. In and through changing their point of attachment the morbid and egotistical element has been sloughed off. The egotistical form of these emotions has been purified.

And secondly, it is primarily through a positive and constructive activity that we come to know, as far as inner experience is concerned, what the nature of tragedy really is. We know this through positive achievement, not primarily through a negative effect. Aristotle has dealt only with the negative aspect of a total process. He deals, strictly speaking, with a form of pity and fear that has no direct concern with our knowledge of what tragedy is. Rather, it is a condition of our knowing. What we know of the essential nature of tragedy we know through the aesthetic experience. In this experience we build up an ideal and successful character, corresponding to the tragic character; and in the moment of our joy we *become* that character. *Katharsis*, or the purification of the pity and fear of everyday life, is not directly a part of the aesthetic experience at all. It is a condition of its consummation. What we know of the nature of tragedy depends less upon a negative than upon a positive and constructive activity.